

The political issues confronting New York City transit workers

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The confrontation between New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) and the city's 38,000 bus and subway workers poses in the sharpest manner critical political questions facing transit workers and working people generally in New York and throughout the US.

While negotiations have been extended beyond the 12:01 a.m. Friday deadline, the MTA and Transport Workers Union (TWU) Local 100 are reportedly still far apart on all significant issues. The mood among rank-and-file transit workers is one of anger and militancy, provoked in the immediate sense by the provocative actions of the MTA and the city in demanding drastic concessions and making extreme threats. These have only served to stoke the workers' rage.

More generally, this militancy and anger have their source in the steady growth of social inequality and the attacks on the living standards, working conditions and basic rights of every section of the working class that have continued uninterruptedly since the last time there was a transit strike in New York City, 25 years ago.

Once again, the city administration of billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg has intervened in a blatant attempt to intimidate workers with threats of retaliation.

Not content with the anti-labor Taylor Law, which fines public employees two days' pay for every day on the picket line, the city's legal department has gone to court seeking an injunction that would impose astronomic fines on each individual worker.

The city proposes a penalty of \$25,000 for every worker on the first day of a walkout, with the fine to be doubled for each additional day on strike. Under such a court order, if a walkout lasted 11 days—as the last strike did in 1980—each worker would end up owing the city \$25 million. The combined total would amount to over \$850 billion, enough to cover the city's current budget for nearly 20 years! Presumably, collection would require that every worker and his offspring for generations to come be placed in debt bondage.

In addition, the fines sought by the city include \$1 million on the first day against the union, doubling each day thereafter. This would mean another \$1 billion given an 11-day walkout.

The MTA's chief negotiator has warned that rank-and-file workers—not to mention union officials—could be jailed for contempt of court for walking off the job. The agency has also threatened that the most senior workers, who participated in the strike 25 years ago, would automatically be fired for joining another walkout.

The clear aim is to break the union even more thoroughly and mercilessly than the Reagan administration broke the air traffic controllers' organization, PATCO, barely a year after the last transit strike.

On Wednesday, the eve of the contract deadline, the MTA board voted unanimously for a 2006 budget that devoted nearly \$1 billion in surplus funds to various programs—including \$100 million in holiday fare reductions—ensuring that none of it would be available to meet transit workers' need for pay increases or pay for health and pension benefits.

According to budget experts, the agency's financial projections are hiding an additional windfall in future revenues of a quarter of a million dollars or more. Under conditions where the MTA is manifestly awash in money, it is maintaining its standard bargaining stance of pleading poverty and insisting that workers make even further concessions.

In doing so, it enjoys the full support of the Wall Street banks and the many corporations headquartered in New York City, all of which see a rollback of the gains won by the TWU over the past seven decades as furthering their drive to slash labor costs and boost profits throughout the economy.

A sizeable sector of the financial community has a direct stake in this struggle. As taxes on business and the transit subsidies they once funded have been slashed, the MTA has increasingly financed its operations exclusively through fares and the sale of interest-bearing bonds, building up a debt that now exceeds \$20 billion. The wealthy bond holders and the representatives of the ruling elite that control the MTA board are determined that the full burden of this debt be placed on the backs of the subway and bus workers.

These aims are translated into the MTA's demands for sweeping concessions. These include a major giveback on pensions and forcing new-hires to work until they are 62 and have 30 years on the job, as opposed to the current system that allows most workers to retire at age 55 after 25 years of service. Workers would also be compelled to pay for part of their health care benefits.

Not only would such a shift mean massive savings for the MTA over the long term, but it would also open up New York public employee pensions and health benefits generally for similar attacks, making huge amounts of wealth available to be funneled back into profits, rather than paid to workers and retirees. The prospect of such a sea change in government spending provides a definite motive for New York's financial elite to push the current

contract dispute over the brink.

Also key to the current confrontation is the drive by management to institute wholesale “broadbanding,” i.e., forcing workers to assume additional tasks and paving the way for the elimination of thousands of jobs. The most audacious of these demands is for the introduction of the One Person Train Operation (OPTO) system, which would eliminate the conductor positions on New York City subways, leaving train operators the sole workers on the city’s trains.

Finally, in its last announced wage offer, the MTA has proposed a mere 3 percent and a 2 percent increase over 27 months—an amount that would fail to keep up with inflation. The transit bosses have even made this miserable amount contingent on workers reducing their use of sick leave.

The provocative character of the MTA’s bargaining position suggests that powerful sections of the ruling elite have determined the time has come to make an example of TWU Local 100 by forcing the union into a strike and delivering it a smashing blow.

On the other side of the social equation, the overwhelming sympathy of workers in New York City lies with the transit workers. Millions face the same pressures of rising living costs in this, one of the most expensive cities in the world. They see in these workers’ struggle the possibility of defying and defeating a financial oligarchy that continuously demands sacrifices from those who can least afford them in order to continue its obscene accumulation of wealth.

The bitterness of the transit contract dispute is, in the final analysis, a symptom of the gaping social chasm that separates the masses of working people in New York from the multi-millionaires who run the city—personified by its mayor, Bloomberg, who bought his way into City Hall by paying over \$100 out of his own pocket for every vote he received.

It is this class of super-rich parasites that stands behind the media drumbeat of slanders against the transit workers, who are routinely denounced as overpaid and under-worked. This media witch-hunt is an effort to diminish public support for the workers’ cause and blunt the immense popular hostility towards the MTA.

A successful struggle against the MTA, the state, the city and the courts, with their threats of fines, jailings and strikebreaking, is inconceivable without a direct appeal to these broad layers of the population, lower-paid workers as well as professionals, immigrants and youth.

There is no indication whatsoever that the leadership of TWU Local 100 is preparing to mount such a struggle. The union bureaucracy, headed by Local 100 President Roger Toussaint, appeals strictly to the lowest common denominator of trade union militancy. At the same time, it is promoting Democratic politicians as friends of the workers—Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton has reportedly inserted herself into the negotiations, while stressing that she is not “taking sides” between management and labor—while urging the likes of New York state’s reactionary Republican Governor George Pataki to get involved in the talks.

Such appeals serve only to politically disarm the workers before their principal enemies. The attacks on transit workers are not merely a matter of the bloody-mindedness of MTA management; rather they express the will and interests of the financial elite and

its political representatives in both major parties.

This position of the TWU bureaucracy can only pave the way to a fresh round of concessions. Given the aggressive character of the MTA’s demands, such a retreat would spell a major betrayal of transit workers and the working class in general.

Defeating these attacks is conceivable only through a fundamentally new political strategy. A strike by 38,000 transit workers in New York City, the financial capital of the world, will from the outset unleash a political confrontation with nationwide and, indeed, international implications. It will pit workers not just against the MTA and Bloomberg, but against Wall Street, corporate America and the Bush administration, all of which view a revival of the class struggle in America as a mortal threat.

The precondition for winning this struggle is the mobilization of broad masses of working people in New York City behind the transit workers. It must be made clear that this struggle is not merely about the contract provisions of TWU Local 100, but the living standards and basic rights of all workers.

The demand must be advanced that the banks, the corporations and the rich be compelled to pay to maintain the vital public services and decent living standards required by all. Defeating the MTA’s attacks means challenging the entire economic and political system that upholds the right of wealthy bondholders to receive their interest payments as sacred, while condemning workers to unemployment, unsafe working conditions and poverty.

Above all, a political answer is required. Workers in New York and all over the country must build their own mass political party to fight for the reorganization of economic life on the basis of social equality and human need, rather than the accumulation of ever greater wealth by the top one percent.

Only such a party can implement a socialist program that begins with the needs of the great majority—the working people—rather than corporate profits, and fights to place the transit system and all of society’s vital services and resources under genuine democratic control. This is the program fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, which are determined to mobilize the broadest support behind New York’s transit workers.



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